

Triple Deckers in Somerville

An Analysis of Alternative Zoning Proposals

Introduction

Somerville has been in the process of overhauling its zoning code since early 2015. Over the four years that have passed since the first draft of the overhaul was submitted there have been multiple revisions and changes in policy decisions. The decision of where to allow triple deckers is just one of the few things that has gone through multiple revisions.

Triple deckers are an iconic part of Somerville's urban fabric, and the decision of where to allow them has changed multiple times. There are five possible scenarios under discussion right now (four of which I have analyzed here) and there are an additional three scenarios that have been discussed in the past and then tabled or discarded for various reasons.

The decision on where to allow triple deckers in Somerville matters because the Greater Boston region is experiencing a critical housing shortage. In SomerVision 2030—the City of Somerville's comprehensive plan adopted in 2010—the City stated a goal of building 6,000 new units in the City, while still maintaining the character of the City.

Methodology

Cleaned up parcels shape file by merging sub-lots together. Added zoning and building type information to each parcel. Created a shape file for each of the four scenarios I was examining. Cleaned up the shape file of each scenario by deleting any parcels with a lot area of less than 1,218 square feet (a proxy for the minimum lot size required to build a triple decker) and any parcels not zoned Neighborhood Residential or Urban Residential (the two zoning designations that triple deckers are allowed in under the new zoning code).

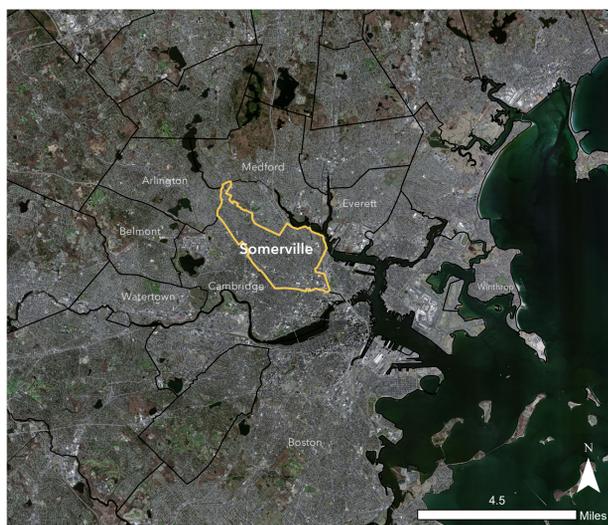
Calculated the number of potential new units under each scenario by subtracting the number of existing units from the total number of units triple deckers allow (3 per parcel). Parcels that currently have 3 or more units have 0 potential new units based on the assumption that parcels that currently have 3 or more units will not convert to triple deckers.

Results

Results are shown in the table below. "Existing" refers to the number of triple deckers that currently exist in Somerville; there are 0 potential new units under that scenario based on the assumption that all triple deckers currently have 3 units.

Scenario	Number of parcels	Number of potential new units
1	1,009	943
2	2,932	2,926
3	7,200	7,304
4	6,971	5,969
Existing	1,142	0

Notes: Each parcel has a range of 0-3 units



Examples of Detached Triple Deckers from around Somerville

Limitations

A major limitation in this analysis is the accuracy of the data. There are over 14,500 individual parcels in Somerville and the information about building type needed to be collected by hand. With this many parcels, there are bound to be some errors in the assignment of building types. This limitation is not expected to significantly affect the final results, but it is something to be aware of.

Conclusion

This analysis shows the vast differences in the number of potential new units that each scenario allows for, assuming that every parcel that could gain units by converting to a triple decker did so. Somerville committed to building 6,000 new units throughout the City in the SomerVision plan, and if Scenario 3 were implemented that goal could be achieved. Scenarios 2 and 4 would also contribute to achieving that goal of 6,000 but could not produce enough units on their own.

Examples of Semi-Detached Triple Deckers from around Somerville



Sources:
City of Somerville, MassGIS, ERSI

Cartographer:
Charlotte Leis
GIS 101: Introduction to GIS
May 7th, 2019

